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Proposal would give NOVA reprieve

By Barbara Martin *Journal staff*

A committee recommendation would buy another year for the Stevens Point Area Public School District's NOVA program, which clusters high-ability students in multi-aged classrooms at Jackson Environmental Discovery Center.

If the School Board approves, a task force will spend the next 10 months assessing the district's gifted and talented program - including NOVA - and will report back in January about possible changes.

Some parents who attended Monday's Curriculum, Learning and Student Achievement meeting said they're pleased with the recommendation to continue the NOVA program for at least another year. They said they will continue to advocate for the program.

"I think it's a step in the right direction," said Cameron Collins, whose daughter is enrolled in NOVA. "The NOVA program does an excellent job of serving the students who participate in it." Perhaps as early as Monday, the School Board will consider the committee's recommendation that includes creating the task force, allowing NOVA to continue for another year and setting a firm criteria that first-graders must meet to enter the program next year.

Superintendent David Schuler suggested the district require that students must score in the 95th percentile on IQ, mathematics and language arts tests to be included in the NOVA program.

In recent years, the district has been inconsistent in the criteria used to admit students to NOVA, said Karen Halverson, assistant superintendent for curriculum, learning and student achievement. Only a few students actually qualified according to the district's stated criteria of scoring in the 98th percentile on the three tests, she said.

In February, Halverson recommended that the district phase out NOVA and reallocate its three teachers to provide more services to gifted and talented students at all of the elementary schools.

This year, 53 students are enrolled in NOVA and spend the entire school day in classrooms with other gifted and talented students. More than 60 gifted and talented students remain in their neighborhood schools and meet with resource teacher Jean Hayden for out-of-classroom services for 30 minutes to one hour every six days.

On Monday, Halverson outlined possible scenarios for reconfiguring the district's gifted and talented program. One configuration would replace NOVA with four centers for gifted and talented students. Students would be bused to the centers at Jackson, Jefferson, McDill and Washington for half-day programs that would serve those who show high ability.

Another scenario would leave students who score at the 95th or 98th percentile in NOVA with one teacher and would return nonqualifying students to their neighborhood schools with out-of-classroom services.

"The possible configurations are only suggestions," Halverson said.

The task force, if approved by the School Board, would develop a plan for consideration. That task force would include parents, teachers and student input.

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